

The life story of pioneer for social justice, Jackie Day.

## **The Old Wolf Lady - A Biography**

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## PREFACE

Assertiveness was a key characteristic of Jacqueline H. Day, and I was continually reminded of this during the years this book was in the making. I was brought up to believe that assertive/aggressive women were something to be frowned upon, to be given derogatory names; certainly they were not women to emulate. Although she was emotionally strong, my mother was definitely not assertive. My sister was, and she was continually punished. More than once I watched in horror as she was beaten to the floor for talking back to our violent stepfather. Childhood conditioning is hard to shed. It took me many years experiences and much reading to develop a deep appreciation and admiration for the quality. I did not know Jackie Day during my formative years; if I had, my enlightenment may have come much earlier. The story you will read here is about a woman raised in poverty, who overcame great odds and refused to bow to a society that tried to reshape her.

As an adult, Jackie Day did not like how Iowans chose to ignore the soldier's plight in Vietnam, or how they were treated when they came home. What did she do? She went to the battlefield. Then she came home and spread the word—Jackie Day style. Jackie Day did not like the lack of recognition for women and the work they did. What did she do? She acted—Jackie Day style. Jackie Day did not like how African-Americans were being treated in the '60's. What did she do? She acted—Jackie Day style. Jackie Day learned that the Native Americans in Tama, Iowa wanted more recognition. What did she do? She acted. That was Jackie Day—an assertive woman of action—through and through. During her lifetime, her electric energy reached out, found, and encouraged the best she encountered in others.

While she lived, she was rewarded for her work. At the reservation in Tama, Iowa she was adopted into the Wolf Tribe and given a name that transcribes to *The Old Wolf Lady*. She was inducted into both the East High Hall of Fame and into the Iowa Women's Hall of Fame. Shelter houses and means of transportation have been named after her. A brick

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in her name was laid in The Plaza of Heroines at Iowa State University in Ames. Jackie Day died on June 23, 2002 knowing that her work had not gone unnoticed.

Jackie Day was a Republican who was often in the public eye. Even before she could vote, politics played a major role in her life. However, for those politically minded readers who may not want to read this book because they feel it is biased politically, I would like to say that this book in no way backs the Republican Party, or any party for that matter. This is a story, rather, honoring a woman who was first and foremost a humanist. This is a story about a woman who took her life journey very seriously, one who gave to others more than she took. This is a story of strife and the triumph of human dignity and a testament to the life of my aunt, the wife of my mother's brother.

The process came complete, however, with doubts and trepidation. I had been looking for my next writing project when I heard Jackie Day (at my older brother's retirement party) telling my sister a story. Her storytelling abilities made me stop in my tracks and listen. Shortly after that I spoke to my mother and asked her to remind me what Aunt Jackie had done with her life. Somewhere back in my memory I remembered she had done something, but what? My mother said she had been in politics and was often featured in the newspaper, but she didn't know much more than that. I was curious. What had she done? I asked more questions of other family members. Yes, she's had an incredible life; you should call her, my brother said. "Her great-grandmother was a Sioux, you know." No, I didn't know.

Not being a telephone type of person (we had a wall phone when we lived on the orchard where I was raised) three shorts and a long was our ring, plus having to stand in our three-bedroom farmhouse in order to talk and having no privacy (any neighbor could pick up the line while you were talking), I never developed the habit of feeling comfortable while talking on the phone. To this day, I am still amazed when I hear a friend chatting with another person or family member on the phone for over half an hour. The whole act seems alien to me. You can imagine how the whole cell phone craze sets with me. I wrote Jackie instead. She wrote me back and said she was interested.

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When I saw her resume, my right eyebrow arched in the shape of a sleeping comma. This woman should have her story told, I thought. But why by me? Because I had proposed it. I was obligated. Almost immediately, however, my motivation plummeted to below sea level. I did it to myself. How in the world had I thought I would want to research and write the life history of another person? I was having a panic attack created by a sense of obligation I was not sure I could meet. I slipped into a state of avoidance.

Time passed. My motivation was non-existent and I knew I had to face Jackie. So, one day after visiting my brother, I stopped by Luther Park where my Aunt Jackie lived (she had spent the day with her son and his family at their home in Des Moines) to tell her that I did not think I could tackle her life story. I told her that I was a creative writer who needed a sense of freedom in her writing and that I had past baggage that made me fearful of commitment. I told her that I had made a mistake in proposing to write her biography. She should find someone else. Aunt Jackie knew just what to do.

While I looked about her living room at the Native American Mandala, the Dream Catcher, and numerous photographs of her children and husband, she left the room with the aid of a walker. I stood looking at the Dream Catcher remembering the myth--they catch the bad dreams and let the good dreams go through. I wondered what Jackie's bad dreams were. I saw a motion out the corner of my eye. A starling landed on the railing of the small balcony off the living room. Its wings billowed then pulled in to hug its body. It seemed comfortable, at peace, much like Jackie. Maybe the Dream Catcher and the meditative power of the Mandala worked. Or was it the peace she felt from her Christian faith? Or was it both? Or was it none of these things?

Jackie returned with a *Sunday Des Moines Register* news clipping in her hand. "Here, read this. It was published over twenty-five years ago," she said. I smiled, taking in her silver hair, her large beaded earrings, her colorful long caftan, then lowered my eyes and read the words of Robert Hulihan, a reporter now dead:

"Bejeweled and exotically perfumed like a woman lately come from the throne room of a fanciful kingdom, Mrs. Jacqueline Day sat on the

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lawn behind Veterans Hospital, looking down with distaste into a cup of spinach...”

I smiled and scanned the page. She was fifty-seven at the time of the writing. I looked at the now eighty-two year old woman and read on:

“I hate it,” said the woman of imperial costume,” addressing the spinach. “It’s a hang-up from my childhood. We were so poor that I slept in a bathtub the first four years of my life. My father was a garbage man. He was a drunk before drunks were popular.”

I laughed. Spunky language. Straight shooter. No hiding behind--I knew right then that I liked this woman, this stranger who was my aunt. Yes, it would be a challenge and a commitment to take on this project, but I liked a challenge. Here was a strong, dynamic woman who had made a difference. I was intrigued. Yet, was she too strong? Would she want a control over my writing that I couldn’t give?

“Well,” I said, still hesitant. And then I told her a little more about me, about my philosophy of writing, how it had always been important for me to be in charge of my work. That I was a poet and fiction writer who had never written a biography, and to date had not published a book. I assured her that I didn’t want to disappoint either her or myself.

“You know Jackie, when I was married I spent hours sewing clothes, cooking, entertaining, and then I did crafts, raised children, now (after my imagination burst through my mind’s thick walls in graduate school) I spend my time writing. I like it. Hell, I love it. I’m drawn to it like a meteor to the earth. I make most of my choices of how I’ll spend my time because of it. It’s while writing that I feel my greatest sense of freedom. I protect my writing, my sense of white space. I can never allow these aspects of my writing to disappear. I don’t want my writing to be a chore. I want it to be a friend, a good friend, one I look forward to going home to, look forward to smiling at over my first cup of coffee, that sort of thing. That’s why I keep doing this. It’s my passion.”

She listened and then looked into my eyes: “You can make my story fiction if you want to. You’re the writer, not me. You’ll have full artistic license. More than one person has proposed writing my story, you know, but it’s a matter of who you want to spend your time with.”

That was the clincher. Sitting in a room surrounded by a Native American Mandala, a Dream Catcher, and a Native American doll with

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her hand resting on the head of a wolf, feeling released from my sense of being strangled, my journey with The Old Wolf Lady from the East Side of Des Moines began.

How did life begin for this woman? Who were the people who helped shape her destiny? What particular Iowa soil was squeezed between her toes? What was happening in history as this child grew to become a woman? How did she react to her personal experiences? What made her tick? What will history say about Jacqueline H. Day?

After serious thought concerning the political correctness issue of how to address Jackie Day in this text, I decided, for two reasons, to not use today's accepted last name reference for women. For those readers who do not understand what I am referring to: It is taught that reference to men by their last names shows respect. It is thought that referring to women in non-fiction by their first names is demeaning. Thus, writers aware of this issue, have consistently and pointedly, out of respect for their female subject, referred to women in the same manner as men. In most cases I agree with this rationale. Women need, in all areas, to be placed on the same level of respect as men (if they earn it). But this case is different. First, the use of 'Day' often caused confusion in a sentence. Second, and more importantly, in conversations with Jackie Day, she explicitly expressed that she wanted her story told in a personal, down-home method. She liked being called Jackie. If anyone did not respect her for that reason, that was their problem. "Color me human," she said with a chuckle.

"Gotya, Jackie," I said.

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